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ABSTRACT

The situation comedy, "Soap," television's first prime-time sex farce, stirred controversy months before its premiere, and subsequent pressure on advertisers forced the network to change the show's concept from an adult comedy to a "whodunit." This report summarizes the controversy, recounts reactions to the series, and lists the implications of the controversy. Criticisms of "Soap" include the following: it seems to condone immoral behavior, is insensitive toward controversial issues, and is not suitable for prime-time scheduling. The television network, on the other hand, defends the series as "sophisticated adult farce" and asserts that none of the themes presented in the show is new to television programming. The report concludes that the apparent influence that pressure groups have had on advertisers approaches censorship and presents serious implications for future programming. (MAI)

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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION CENTER REPORT NO. 387

# TELEVISION'S 'SOAP' CONTROVERSY

**This report was written by Brent Stutzman, an M.A. candidate at the University of Missouri School of Journalism.**

**Introduction**

The American Broadcasting Company's television series "Soap" premiered Sept. 13, 1977, amidst raging controversy. The first inklings of a tempest began in early May shortly after the first two "Soap" episodes were screened before ABC affiliate station managers. Comments about the show, which airs on Tuesdays at 9:30 p.m. EDT, have ranged from "an exceptionally entertaining program"[1] to "a prolonged dirty joke."[2] The controversy helped (New York **Times**, 9-11-77) "Soap" receive more advance publicity than perhaps any other production in television history.

The protest over "Soap" seemed to subside after Alfred Schneider, ABC vice president for programming, said the show's concept changed from a sex farce to a whodunit.[3]

As a background to the "Soap" controversy, this report will look first at the attitude the television industry has taken toward sexual issues.

Then the focus will be on "Soap" itself: the formative stages, the basic story line, the advance publicity, the screening before affiliate station managers, the ABC closed circuit broadcast in defense of the program, subsequent plot revisions and the change in the program's concept.

Reactions to the show from ABC affiliate station executives, religious groups and advertisers will be discussed next. The report also will include predictions of the program's success and a discussion of its Nielsen ratings. Major criticisms of the program and the implications of the "Soap" controversy will be considered.

**The Industry's Attitude Toward Presenting Sexual Issues**

Without a doubt, television is the most conservative of the mass media when it comes to sex.[4] Bill Rubens, vice president of research at the National Broadcasting Company, said, "TV is not and does not want to be a trendsetter of the sexual revolution. In fact it lags **behind** the prevailing attitudes."[5]

Frank Pierce, Universal Television president, said, "The sexual breakthrough in TV has probably taken us to where the movies were in 1935."[6] Writer Arthur Lubow put it in different terms: "In television, the final refuge of Victorianism, eroticism is the great no-no."[7]

The basic reason for television's conservative stance toward sex is a complex, built-in system of checks and balances that prevents radical trends from emerging. Participants in the system are the networks, affiliate stations, advertisers and the audience. Networks compete with each other, which fosters experimentation; affiliates are responsible to the Federal Communications Commission for what is broadcast; advertisers do not want their products advertised on a show that possibly may annoy viewers; and audience reaction is scrutinized by the networks. In general, "[t]he creative forces which press for innovation are nearly always restrained by conservative forces."[8]

Despite the conservative attitude, sexual permissiveness has seeped (New York **Times**, 9-11-77) into television content. In 1952, a Columbia Broadcasting System censor refused to allow Lucy Ricardo of "I Love Lucy" to tell her husband she was "pregnant," but he grudgingly allowed her to be "expecting." The premiere of "All in the Family" in 1971 showed a young married couple in a loving mood going upstairs. Divorcee Mary Richards on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" could stay overnight with men in 1973.[9]

CBS censor Van Gordon Sauter said:

> What is really of concern to a lot of people is how we portray changing moral values. Most perceive them as changing in a very negative way, and they think television is contributing to or at least condoning the change.[10]

Comedies, such as "Soap," are more controversial, according to Herminio Traviesas, NBC's vice president of broadcast standards. He said:

> If you take a sexual theme and deal with it dramatically, you can understand why boy meets girl, boy falls in love with girl, and they go to bed together. But if you do a comedy and make fun of sex, the public seems to get irritated.[11]

**Summary:** ABC's situation comedy "Soap," television's first prime-time sex farce, stirred controversy four months before its premiere, but subsequent pressure on advertisers forced the network to change the show's concept from an adult comedy to a whodunit. This report summarizes the controversy, including reactions to the series, criticisms and implications.

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One problem with sexual issues presented on television is that there is no consensus that it is antisocial to portray sex-oriented topics.[12] Some people believe it is a legitimate topic for television; others believe that showing anything sexual on television is in poor taste.

How much sex is on television? A team of researchers under Professor Eli Rubinstein of the State University of New York at Stony Brook recently completed a content analysis of 61 prime-time shows and concluded that there is no sex on television. Sex is sometimes discussed but never portrayed, according to the study. Rubinstein said:

> The major finding was that physical intimacy appeared most often in less sensuous forms than one would expect from public criticism of the portrayal of sexuality on current television programming.[13]

Evidence indicates that until recently the viewing public did not rise up en masse to protest the increasing sexual permissiveness on television. In 1976, NBC received 3,268 written complaints about sex or morality, less than two percent of the total letters received. And that figure included some 900 letters from organized write-in campaigns, which cannot be considered representative of public opinion. But even ignoring that fact, 3,000 letters in a year does not indicate that the public is upset with sexual permissiveness on television, considering that most prime-time shows are seen by more than 20 million people.[14]

But the protest about moral permissiveness appears to be on the increase. Complaints to the FCC about indecency, obscenity and profanity on radio and television rose from 6,143 to 20,146 in one year. ABC received more than 22,000 letters protesting "Soap" before the first episode even appeared.[15]

**"Soap": Formative Stages, Advance Publicity, Plot Revisions, Initial Reactions to the Revisions and Concept Change**

When writer Susan Harris brought her series concept to ABC in early 1976, network officials recognized immediately that the show could either be a smashing success or a catastrophic failure.[16] ABC censor Schneider said,

> It was recognized as being an innovative show. We were aware at the time that it would have to be done extremely well to be acceptable.[17]

"Soap" is a "sophisticated adult farce," according to one ABC executive.[18] Dan Rustin, ABC manager of audience information, said,

> It's a contemporary character comedy that deals with contemporary problems and relationships of two suburban families in a sophisticated way.[19]

The basic plot concerns the families of two sisters, Jessica Tate and Mary Campbell: Jessica is wealthy and Mary is middle class. Jessica's husband, Chester, is having an affair with his secretary, while Jessica is having an affair with her tennis instructor, although neither knows what the other is doing. Eunice, the Tates' oldest daughter, seems to uphold virtue but that later proves to be a false impression. The youngest daughter, Corinne, is having an affair with her tennis instructor — who, predictably, is also Jessica's tennis instructor. Billy, the youngest Tate, is obsessed with pornography. Also in the Tate household are the Major, Jessica's father, who is still fighting World War II; and Benson, a cocky butler and the object of the Major's racial slurs. In the other household, Mary's husband, Burt, is impotent because — unknown to Mary — he murdered Mary's first husband. One of Mary's two sons, Danny, is in the Mafia. Jodie, her other son, is a homosexual who desires a sex change.

After reading the first two scripts, censor Schneider wanted all the explicit sexual, ethnic and religious quips deleted. ABC Entertainment President Fred Silverman told writer Harris to concede on a couple of instances but ignore the rest. The first two shows were then taped.[20]

Early in 1977, Silverman said, " 'Soap' will be a breakthrough the way 'All in the Family' was a breakthrough."[21] Lubow said,

> The network was deliberately stirring up controversy, for pre-season notoriety could only help the show . . . up to a point.[22]

The controversy began in early May after the first two "Soap" episodes, along with other new ABC shows, were screened in Los Angeles for the network's affiliate station managers. Leo MacCourtney, vice president and general manager of WOWK-TV in Huntington, W. Va., watched the new show screenings and was embarrassed by "Soap," calling the first two episodes,

> an hour-long dirty joke, and it's just not television's role to walk into someone's living room and tell a dirty joke.[23]

Soon afterward MacCourtney and George Koehler, president of WOWK-TV's parent company, decided not to broadcast "Soap." Other affiliates were soon to follow suit. (More will be said later on reactions from affiliate station officials.)

By mid-July, after articles hostile to "Soap" had appeared in **Newsweek**, **Time** and the Los Angeles **Times**, ABC executives decided that the network would give the show no further publicity until the Sept. 13 premiere. Everyone connected with the show was ordered not to talk to the press, and no reporters were allowed in the studio audience when the third show was filmed on July 20.[24]

On July 15, Silverman, in a closed-circuit transmission aimed at calming nervous ABC affiliate station officials, said (**Christian Science Monitor**, 7-21-77):

> We made it to the top by innovating and by having the courage of our own convictions, and that's the only way we'll stay there. . . .
>
> We certainly do not intend "Soap" to be a model of human behavior or the American family. We're dealing with human foibles and imperfections in such an exaggerated way that the clear message is not "do what they do" but "laugh, enjoy and learn what not to do.". . .
>
> One point I want to underscore. . . . No character in "Soap" is ever rewarded for immoral behavior. And, in the final analysis, there will always be retribution for such behavior. This socially redeeming aspect of "Soap" becomes clear as the story unfolds from week to week.

In the same transmission, ABC censor Schneider said (**Christian Science Monitor**, 7-21-77) parts of the first two episodes would be redone to avoid "needless, gratuitous, offensive material." Silverman added that radical changes were being made in the subsequent story line.[25]

Changes in the first two episodes included a scene showing Jessica and the tennis instructor in bed. It was retaped to have her standing near the bed. Another change: in the original version, as soon as Jessica left the tennis instructor's room, Corinne entered through another door and said to him, "Get your clothes off." In the revised segment, the two merely embraced.[26]

According to the original story line, which Schneider said was never approved by the network, Corinne was to seduce Father Flotsky, an unconventional young priest advocating the use of Oreo cookies instead of the traditional wafers for Mass. To live with Corinne, Father Flotsky left the church. Corinne eventually became pregnant, and the baby underwent an exorcism. Among the changes are that now Father Flotsky resists passes made by Corinne. Also, homosexual Jodie never has his sex change operation, but instead meets a girl and finds himself in an identity crisis.[27]

Some questioned whether the revisions accomplished anything. An ABC affiliate official said the changes in the first two episodes were "predictable and purely cosmetic. The improper thrust of the program remained unaltered."[28] Lubow said the changes were "nibbles rather than big bites, mostly deletion of explicitly sexual remarks or innuendos."[29]

The story line revisions will make "Soap" less real and less funny, according to Norman Lear, creator of the once-controversial "All in the Family." Lear said:

> From what I hear, an avowed gay is going to fall in love with a girl and go straight. That's the network forcing its will on the creators. They're forcing the creative people, who should know better, to rewrite human behavior.[30]

Opinions differ on why ABC elected to tone down "Soap."[31] An official of the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, a religious group active in the anti-"Soap" campaign, said he believes ABC made the changes because of the "vigorous protest" of ABC affiliate station officials, but the protests of others possibly made a difference.[32] Arthur Unger, television critic for the **Christian Science Monitor**, speculated (7-21-77) that perhaps ABC made the changes because of pressure from other network executives who feared the controversy's "fall out" might affect their own comparatively less risque programming.

Because Midwest stations, which run shows an hour earlier, expressed concern about the 8:30 p.m. viewing time, Silverman gave them the unprecedented option of flip-flopping "Soap" with "Family," the hour-long show that normally would precede it.[33] Other affiliates were given (Miami **Herald**, 9-5-77) permission to delay the telecast.

In December, seven months after the controversy erupted, ABC's Schneider said that the show's content was changed to a whodunit. "The episodes do not deal with the adult themes that concerned us originally," he said.[34] Harry N. Hollis Jr., director of family and special moral concerns of the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, said the commission learned of the decision of the network in November from several station managers.[35]

Hollis said ABC changed the content because the network was forced to reduce advertising rates to entice sponsors (more on this later). "The fact is that they were losing money," he said. "It's not a change of heart nor a change in philosophical approach. It was a hurt pocketbook that caused them to change the content."[36]

**Reactions to "Soap" from Affiliate Stations**

ABC said in October that 19 of 201 affiliate stations (9.4 percent) had chosen to cancel "Soap." Forty-nine stations in the central and mountain time zones flip-flop "Soap" with "Family." At least nine stations delay the telecast until 11:30 p.m., and at least three affiliates delay the telecast several days.[37]

At least two ABC affiliates canceled "Soap" shortly after the May screening. MacCourtney of WOWK-TV in Huntington said "Soap" would not be seen in Huntington as long as it "continues in the vein of explicit sexuality for explicit sexuality."[38] In place of the program, WOWK shows reruns of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," a package costing $400,000.[39] MacCourtney said "Soap":

> . . . is harmful. It attacks basic human moral principles. Young people watching it will think, "I guess it's okay to sleep around; I guess it's okay to be a transvestite." I don't think this program should be on television.[40]

Another early cancellation of the first two episodes came from WJZ-TV in Baltimore, but station officials are reviewing subsequent shows on a show-by-show basis. Stephen H. Kimatian, general manager of the ABC affiliate, said WJZ-TV officials do not believe "Soap" is appropriate for a mass audience. He added that the subject matter of controversial issues, including old age, race relations, sex, religion and homosexuality, are treated in an insensitive manner.[41]

Buford Television Inc. denied clearance for "Soap" to all four of its stations: KFSM-TV in Fort Smith, Ark.; KTRE-TV in Lufkin, Texas; KXON-TV in Mitchell, S.D.; and KLTV in Tyler, Texas. In a statement voicing the corporate position, Buford executives said the show is in "poor taste for a family audience." The decision was based on viewing the first three episodes, but corporate officials are monitoring subsequent episodes.[42]

ABC's Miami affiliate, WPLG-TV, agreed to move "Soap" out of its prime-time schedule and make it a late-night show, at least temporarily. The station moved (Miami **Herald**, 9-5-77) the show from 9:30 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. after protests by the Christian Life Commission of the Miami Baptist Association and the Radio and Television Office of the Miami Archdiocese of the Catholic Church.

Viewer response was overwhelmingly positive when affiliate stations canceled "Soap." Mail at WOWK-TV in Huntington ran 100 to one in favor of the station's decision. The few letters of criticism came from people who believed the station had no right to serve as a censor.[43] Response at Baltimore's WJZ-TV was 25 to one in support of the station's decision. Kimatian of WJZ-TV said he could not think of any other controversial issue concerning the station that had generated so much favorable discussion.[44] KFSM-TV in Fort Smith received several hundred letters from churches and individuals favoring the corporation's decision to cancel.[45]

The defections have reduced ABC's intake of advertising dollars. During prime-time hours, when commercial minutes sell for the most, affiliate stations usually run network shows. In return, affiliates receive revenue from one commercial minute per hour. When an affiliate cancels a network show, the network loses some of its audience and, therefore, some of its advertising revenue. If enough stations refuse to air a show, the network, faced with losing profits, must find a replacement.

**Reactions to "Soap" from Religious Groups**

"Soap" caused an uproar among religious groups. Al Antczak, editor of the Roman Catholic newspaper **Tidings**, said,

> The desecration of morality and of the Catholic religion in particular is an outrage that calls for protest in the strongest terms.[46]

The United States Catholic Conference called for the program's removal from the air and said "Soap" is a direct contradiction of television's traditional status as a family medium.[47] An official of the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention called the program "a sorry show which reeks with moral pollution."[48]

"Soap" narrowly was edged out (St. Louis **Globe-Democrat**, 11-18-77) by "Maude" as the most offensive prime-time television show, according to a survey among members of the Church of God headquartered at Cleveland, Tenn.

The Rev. Carl Richardson, director of the church's Communications Committee, said more than 5,000 families from 50 states participated in the fall 1977 poll. He warned sponsors of the "10 Worst" shows that the church plans to encourage its million members and the other 49 million evangelical Christians in America to boycott the sponsors' products if they do not withdraw their ads.[49]

Some religious groups organized their campaigns against "Soap" instead of taking a haphazard approach. Officials of the Christian Life Commission viewed the first two episodes in early May with ABC affiliates and 11 advertisers identified by **Weekly Television Digest with Consumer Electronics** as scheduled advertisers on the premiere. Commission officials saw the revised versions of the first two shows in August and again communicated their opposition to the advertisers. After the show began in September, the commission continued to protest "Soap" and encouraged members of its denomination to communicate their views to local affiliates and sponsors. The commission also supplied Baptist state papers with names and addresses of sponsors of each episode of "Soap."[50]

The Baptist State Convention of North Carolina instigated (Miami **Herald**, 9-22-77) a postcard campaign to protest the series. Doug Cole, director of the convention's Department of Christian Family Life, said the council was requested to send 300,000 postcards to the denomination's 4,500 churches in North Carolina. The council encouraged members to mail them to local stations, protesting the show.[51]

One side of the postcard has (Miami **Herald**, 9-22-77) the address of one of six North Carolina stations that carried the show (two canceled it). The other side carries the message: "My immediate reaction to ABC's program 'Soap' is:" followed by blank spaces for comments.

Dr. Charles V. Petty, director of the convention's Christian Life Council, said the council is not trying to tell church members how to vote on the issue. "Obviously, we are hoping most of our people will respond by saying they do not agree with the values purported by 'Soap,' " he said.

A national coalition called "No Soap," a loosely organized body of 10 religious groups, urged (Miami **Herald**, 9-5-77) ABC to cancel "Soap." The coalition also asked 100 of the top American firms using the most television advertising not to sponsor the program.

The National Council of Churches, the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church and the National Council of Catholic Bishops, collectively representing 138,000 congregations, urged (Los Angeles **Times**, 9-5-77) their congregations to watch the show's first episodes and then tell local stations what they thought.

**Reactions to "Soap" from Advertisers**

Advertisers are under heavy pressure from interest groups not to schedule advertising on "Soap." Some agency officials likened (New York **Times**, 8-30-77) the pressure to the 1950s, when advertisers were pressured not to sponsor certain performers suspected by right-wing organizations of being sympathetic to communists.

The pressure took its toll. All of the original "Soap" sponsors eventually withdrew their advertisements, according to Hollis. A lack of willing advertisers forced ABC to offer commercial time at reduced rates and to offer free time to at least one sponsor.[52] The network lost up to $1 million because of the reduced rates.[53]

Nissan Motors and Pfizer Drugs pulled advertisements scheduled for the Sept. 13 premiere. Both said company guidelines, not interest group pressure, forced the decision.[54] ABC sales executives said that despite the pullouts, the premiere showing was "sold out."[55]

Vlasic Foods decided not to continue advertising on "Soap" after the first episode. Dennis Sullivan, president of Vlasic Foods, said the show was not consistent with the company's media strategy. He also said Vlasic received many negative letters from religious groups. Jovan Inc.'s Victor Zast, director of creative service, said the company advertised on the first two episodes but would not continue on the series.[56]

Timex originally scheduled (Miami **Herald**, 9-13-77) three advertisements during November and December on "Soap," but canceled after screening the show's initial episodes. A spokesman for the Gray and Davis advertising agency, which handles Timex's account, said Timex wanted more time to evaluate "Soap's" audience delivery and program content.

**Major Criticisms of "Soap"**

The chief criticism of "Soap" is probably that it seems to condone immoral behavior. The United States Catholic Conference said the term "adult," when used in reference to the content of "Soap," means a "titillating obsession with sex."[57] One affiliate executive called "Soap" a "tasteless show with little entertainment value."[58]

ABC officials insist that "Soap" is strictly entertainment and that immoral behavior will not be rewarded.[59] Don McGannon, chairman and president of Group W Broadcasting, said that although immoral behavior may be punished, "Soap" takes too many weeks to get to that conclusion.[60] The United States Catholic Conference said:

> . . . immoral behavior is no less immoral because it is punished, and a television series that endlessly wallows in the depiction of such actions is not socially responsible. . . .[61]

"Soap" also has been criticized for its insensitivity toward controversial issues. Television critic Unger said (**Christian Science Monitor**, 9-7-77):

> Rather than the hard-hitting, irrelevant farce that was foreseen by its creators, "Soap" has turned out to be superficial, stereotypical, crassly calculating in its use of delicate subject matter with a minimum of sensitivity. Rather than sophistication, what has emerged is sophomoric grossness — the flaunting of

> sexual attitudes like an adolescent mouthing dirty words for shock effect.

"('Soap') is without cleverness or style or subtlety," said Los Angeles **Times** critic Cecil Smith. "Its sex jokes are delivered by the shovelful, like manure."[62]

Columnist George F. Will said (Los Angeles **Times**, 9-8-77):

> . . . "Soap" is not an act of moral bravery. It is a corporation's carefully calculated ploy for expanding profits by expanding its audience; it is just the latest network tactic for titillating an increasingly desensitized public.

Another criticism is that the program is scheduled during prime time; "Soap" might not have aroused such a tempest if it had been scheduled outside prime time. Children's hours on television are from 8 to 11 p.m. The networks label 8 to 9 p.m. as "family hour," when sex and violence are to be minimized. Although a court decision declared the family hour unenforceable, networks continue to follow the policy for the most part. "Soap" was the first break from the unwritten rule.

**Has "Soap" Been a Success?**

Despite the swirling controversy, predictions were that "Soap" would be a success. One affiliate manager said "Soap" would succeed if for no other reason than the number of curious viewers who would tune in.[63] NBC's chief programming executive predicted that the show would start with a giant 50 share, or 50 percent of the viewing audience.[64]

"Soap" captured a 40 share during its Sept. 13 premiere, to rank fourth among network shows in the weekly Nielsen ratings. A 40 share is considered good, but ABC officials "had to be disappointed."[65] Advertising agency people said ABC salesmen had been saying "Soap" would get a 50 share.[66]

But the show premiere did do well in selected cities. It got a 45 share in New York, a 49 share in Chicago and a 50 share in Los Angeles. ABC affiliate WFAA-TV in Dallas took an unannounced survey during the premiere, contacting 276 homes, and found that of 149 watching television, 70 (a 47 share) were watching "Soap."[67]

The second episode dropped to 11th place in the Nielsen ratings, with a 32 share, but still was ranked highest of the new shows. Other ratings were a 34 share, 12th place on Sept. 27; a 33 share, 18th place on Oct. 4; a 35 share, 13th place on Oct. 13 (Thursday); a 35 share, 20th place on Oct. 25 and Nov. 1; a 36 share, 18th place on Nov. 8; a 24 share, below 30th place on Nov. 15; a 36 share, 12th place on Nov. 22; a 34 share, 16th place on Nov. 29; a 36 share, 15th place on Dec. 6; a 37 share, 7th place on Dec. 13; a 35 share, 10th place on Dec. 20; a 32 share, 18th place on Dec. 27; a 35 share, 13th place on Jan. 3; a 33 share, 21st place on Jan. 10; and a 32 share, 17th place on Jan. 17.[68] "Soap" is one of three new shows of the 1977-78 season to be rated consistently high in the Nielsen survey.[69]

Hollis of the Christian Life Commission questioned whether "Soap" could be called a success. He said it is not successful financially, because ABC is subsidizing its advertising, and it is not successful critically as a comedy, because reviews have been essentially negative. He added, "So far it has survived, but I doubt if survival and success could be properly equated."[70]

**Implications of the Controversy**

The "Soap" protest taught pressure groups that the most effective way to influence networks is through sponsors.[71] "They're vulnerable at the point of sponsorship," Hollis said. "People don't want to advertise on shows that hurt their products."[72]

Some observers said special-interest group pressure verges on censorship. The Washington **Post** (9-4-77) editorialized that group pressure is:

> . . . a form of censorship of the airwaves that denies most viewers a chance to decide for themselves whether controversial programs are interesting, tasteful or fair.

An NBC executive said interest-group pressure can exert "a chilling effect which in a subtler and more insidious manner produces the same consequences as formal, explicit censorship."[73]

Paul Junger Witt, co-executive producer of "Soap," said in October, two months before Schneider's comment that the concept changed, that if ABC gave in to the pressure, it would be "an irreversible step toward selling out freedom of expression."[74]

Traviesas of NBC went so far as to say that it is wrong for a network to readily submit to pressure groups. He said the program "Jesus of Nazareth" would not have been shown if NBC had acknowledged the request of one group.[75]

ABC's Silverman said that when an advertiser cancels on a controversial show, "we all take a step backward to a mass medium that is less free, less diverse, less creative and less democratic." He said pressure group blacklists of advertisers that sponsor suggestive programs are undemocratic, and it is unconstitutional to "conspire to boycott a company for advertising on a program one doesn't happen to like."[76]

Many expressed fear that if ABC canceled "Soap" to please pressure groups, all television would feel the effect. Witt said that giving in to pressure groups will increase their power and encourage their activities against other programs. Witt said meeting a pressure group's demands "certainly would create a precedent which would allow special-interest groups to override the judgment of the network, affiliates, advertisers and creative community."[77]

Television critic Unger said (**Christian Science Monitor**, 9-7-77) the danger of "Soap"

> . . . lies in its encouragement of special-interest censorship which could easily snowball into self-serving vigilantism eventually eliminating mature programming of any kind in prime time.

Lear warns that if networks revise programming to suit interest groups, it will force all television back to the blandness of the late '50s and early '60s.[78]

Programs like "Soap" pave the way for government intervention in television programming, according to Hollis of the Christian Life Commission. He said responsible self-regulation is the best way to avoid intervention. He said the commission's intent in protesting "Soap" is "to call the television industry to meet its responsibility to the American people."[79]

Many fear that "Soap" will set a trend toward more blatant treatment of sex on television. Dr. Everett Parker, director of the United Church of Christ's Office of Communication, said "Soap" may be

> . . . the opening wedge for the explicit denigration of sex into a real commodity that can be packaged

with a ribbon on it.[80]

The general manager of an affiliate that canceled "Soap" said it undoubtedly will not be the last such decision that stations will have to make.[81] CBS censor Van Gordon Sauter said, "There's no doubt about it: There will be more and more sex on television."[82]

**Conclusion**

The program's pre-season notoriety made "Soap" the most talked-about show of the year; however, the controversy virtually ceased when the program changed to a whodunit.

Intense emotions concerning "Soap" seemed to cool long before the show's content changed. When the first episode was shown, ABC had seven extra public relations staffers on hand in New York to answer the telephone, but they were not needed. Of the homes surveyed by WFAA-TV in Dallas during the premiere, 71 percent of the 70 homes where "Soap" was being watched answered "yes" when asked, "Should 'Soap' be on TV?"[83]

Why was there any controversy? Antics similar to "Soap" situations have been portrayed on other television shows: afternoon soap opera characters are not known for their righteous behavior. Sex jokes may be new to prime time, but they are familiar to those who watched Mary Hartman battle her kitchen's yellow wax buildup. And no racial slur is in "Soap" that Archie Bunker has not already uttered. Lubow said,

> What was new about "Soap" was the program's concept: the heart of the show was located below the belt. . . . the first prime-time sex farce.[84]

The apparent influence pressure groups had on advertisers and, subsequently, the program's content, undoubtedly will set a precedent. Pressure groups will be more inclined to rise up in arms when they deem it necessary. Hollis said the Christian Life Commission is willing to involve itself in a similar protest if the need arises.[85]

The show probably will be a landmark in the more blatant treatment of sex on television. Yet to be determined is what the next step will be after "Soap." The program's future will be determined financially. If it begins to receive noncompetitive ratings, ABC probably will drop "Soap" with little fanfare.

FOOTNOTES

1. Dan Rustin, ABC manager of audience information, form letter postmarked Oct. 27, 1977.
2. NBC, "Tomorrow," Oct. 5 discussion of fall television schedule with four television critics.
3. **TV Guide**, Dec. 31, 1977, quoted in "ABC TV Executive Confirms Alterations in 'Soap,' " Baptist Press news release, Jan. 9, 1978.
4. Bill Rubens, "Sex on TV," rough draft of speech, Oct. 7, 1977, p. 4.
5. **Ibid.**, p. 12.
6. "Sex and TV," **Newsweek**, Feb. 20, 1978, p. 54.
7. Arthur Lubow, " 'Soap' Hits the Fan," **New Times**, Sept. 2, 1977, p. 39.
8. Rubens, "Sex on TV," p. 15.
9. Lubow, " 'Soap' Hits the Fan," p. 29.
10. **Ibid.**, p. 37.
11. **Ibid.**, p. 39.
12. Rubens, "Sex on TV," p. 4.
13. **Ibid.**, p. 6. Study also discussed in Lubow, " 'Soap' Hits the Fan," p. 40. Not all agree with this line of reasoning. In Rubens' opinion there is no sex on television, but some people who watch the same programs Rubens watches have said that television is saturated with sex.
14. **Ibid.**, p. 10.
15. "Sex and TV," p. 55, 58.
16. Lubow, " 'Soap' Hits the Fan," p. 30.
17. **Ibid.**
18. "Is Prime Time Ready for Sex?" **Time**, July 11, 1977, p. 75.
19. Rustin letter.
20. Lubow, " 'Soap' Hits the Fan," p. 30.
21. **Ibid.** "All in the Family," a once controversial CBS show that premiered in 1971, is a satire featuring Archie Bunker, a bigoted blue collar worker.
22. **Ibid.**
23. **Ibid.**, p. 31.
24. **Ibid.**, p. 30.
25. **Ibid.**, p. 38.
26. **Ibid.**, p. 37.
27. **Ibid.**, p. 32, 38.
28. Leo M. MacCourtney, vice president and general manager of WOWK TV in Huntington, W. Va., in letter to author, Oct. 20, 1977.
29. Lubow, " 'Soap' Hits the Fan," p. 37.
30. **Ibid.**, p. 38.
31. The author wrote to ABC Entertainment President Fred Silverman asking his opinion on this and other matters but received only a form letter in reply. (Silverman will become NBC president and chief executive officer in June 1978.)
32. Harry N. Hollis Jr., director of family and special moral concerns of the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, in letter to author, Oct. 19, 1977.
33. Lubow, " 'Soap' Hits the Fan," p. 37.
34. **TV Guide**, quoted in Baptist Press news release, Jan. 9, 1978. In the Feb. 28, 1978, episode, Jessica is on trial for allegedly murdering Peter Campbell, her tennis instructor and her brother in law's son by a previous marriage.
35. Harry N. Hollis Jr., in telephone interview with author, Feb. 24, 1978. Also "Christian Life Commission Claims Victory over 'Soap,' " Baptist Press news release, Nov. 21, 1977, p. 1.
36. **Ibid.**
37. " 'Soap' Creators Counter attack: 'Why No Support From Others?' " **Variety**, Oct. 12, 1977, p. 52.
38. MacCourtney letter.
39. Lubow, " 'Soap' Hits the Fan," p. 36.
40. **Ibid.**
41. Stephen H. Kimatian, general manager of WJZ TV in Baltimore, Md., in letter to author, Oct. 21, 1977.
42. Bob Browning, general manager of KFSM TV in Fort Smith, Ark., in letter to author, Oct. 14, 1977.
43. MacCourtney letter.
44. Kimatian letter.
45. Browning letter.
46. "Is Prime Time Ready for Sex?" p. 75.
47. Public statement, Aug. 8, 1977, by United States Catholic Conference (Department of Communication, 1011 First Avenue, Suite 1300, New York, N. Y. 10022), p. 1.
48. Harry N. Hollis Jr., "Keep After 'Soap,' " undated text of editorial included with letter of Oct. 19, 1977.
49. Others on the "10 Worst" list are, in order: CBS's "All in the Family," ABC's "Three's Company," ABC's "Baretta," CBS's "M A S H," ABC's "Redd Foxx" (no longer on the air), ABC's "Charlie's Angels," CBS's "Jeffersons," and CBS's "Kojak."
50. Hollis letter. Silverman said ABC received 22,000 anti "Soap" letters from individuals asked by interest groups to express their opposition. An ABC affiliate executive in the heart of the "Bible Belt," Mike Shapiro of WFAA TV in Dallas, said he expected several thousand letters of opposition to the station's broadcasting "Soap." ("Meanwhile, ABC's 'Soap' Premiered," **Weekly Television Digest with Consumer Electronics**, Sept. 19, 1977, p. 2.)
51. Doug Cole, director of Department of Christian Family Commission Life of Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, in telephone interview with author, Feb. 15, 1978.
52. "Christian Life Commission Claims Victory over 'Soap,' " p. 1.
53. **Ibid.** Also "Sex and TV," p. 58. Hollis said the estimate for ABC's lost ad revenue has never been challenged (Hollis telephone interview).
54. "Dope on 'Soap': Pull Some Ads, 15 Affils Scram," **Variety**, Aug. 31, 1977, p. 58.
55. "Meanwhile, ABC's 'Soap' Premiered," p. 2.
56. "ABC Strong in Net Survival Test; Stragglers Face Early Extraction," **Advertising Age**, Sept. 26, 1977, p. 2.
57. United States Catholic Conference public statement, p. 2.
58. Browning letter.
59. Rustin letter.
60. "Dope on 'Soap,' " p. 57.
61. United States Catholic Conference public statement, p. 3.
62. Dwight Whitney, "What Uproar Over 'Soap'?" **TV Guide**, Nov. 26, 1977, p. 10.
63. Browning letter.
64. Lubow, " 'Soap' Hits the Fan," p. 30.
65. ABC spokesman, in telephone interview with author, Feb. 24, 1978.
66. Sally Bedell, " 'Soap,' 'Washington' Ratings Are Lower Than ABC Expected," **TV Guide**, Sept. 24, 1977, p. A-3.
67. "Meanwhile, ABC's 'Soap' Premiered," p. 2.
68. ABC spokesman.
69. ABC's "Love Boat" and CBS's "On Our Own" are the other two.
70. Hollis letter.
71. Hollis telephone interview. Also "Sex and TV."
72. **Ibid.**
73. Rubens, "Sex on TV," p. 17.

74. " 'Soap' Creators Counter attack," p. 52. Witt charged that ABC was forced to stand alone against the pressure groups. "The other two networks were not only "non supportive," Witt said, but "accusatory."
75. Herminio Traviesas, NBC vice president of broadcast standards, in letter to author, Oct. 18, 1977.
76. "Protests Mount Against More Advertiser Control of TV Content," **Advertising Age**, Nov. 14, 1977, p. 92. In reply to Silverman's charge that boycotts are undemocratic, Unger said, "Tell that to the black people of Birmingham who refused to ride the city buses until racial segregation was ended." ("Will ABC pull the plug on 'Soap'?" **Christian Science Monitor**, Nov. 14, 1977, p. 30.)
77. " 'Soap' Creators Counter attack," p. 52.
78. "Protests Mount," p. 92.
79. Hollis letter.
80. Lubow, " 'Soap' Hits the Fan," p. 32.
81. Browning letter.
82. Lubow, " 'Soap' Hits the Fan," p. 40.
83. "Meanwhile, ABC's 'Soap' Premiered," p. 2.
84. Lubow, " 'Soap' Hits the Fan," p. 30.
85. Hollis telephone interview.